

## **Harry Spence's lessons from public service**

*Harry Spence, now Commissioner of Social Services for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, has made a career of working in crisis situations in the public sector. He has served as the receiver for the City of Chelsea, director of the Cambridge Housing Authority and the Boston Housing Authority, and the deputy chancellor for the New York City school system. Over the years, Spence has learned many of the lessons of public service that elude others. He shared his thoughts on public service at a seminar for the summer internship program of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Some excerpts from the gathering on June 6, 2001:*

### **Democracy**

Democracy is a matter of public process and dialogue, not just a matter of getting 50 percent plus one on your side.

Policy requires constantly clarifying values. That requires talking with people. But is also requires coming to some conclusions, even if those conclusions are tentative.

Politics is everywhere. Even when you have the full power and authority of a judge, you still need to get people to want to carry out your desires.

### **Public process**

Participation without a clear structure and agenda is a disaster.

You need to know what questions to ask. The public sector has the responsibility for offering a hypothesis for discussion – not asking open-ended questions. You need to focus on your objectives, and clearly set boundaries by being honest about the things you will not consider.

On the other hand, you can only discover where you're going in a process. A good process requires

- ✓ talking to the right people,
- ✓ asking the right questions,
- ✓ respecting the work and learning that people have already done, and
- ✓ publicly demonstrating learning.

### **Organizations**

What you think is standard operating procedures often turns out not to be. Every organization is only as good as the people in the organization.

Scale matters. The ego extends to the boundaries of small organizations; your own identity is tied into the identity of the organization. In large organizations, most of the activities are unknowable to a single person.

Running large and small organizations is just as difficult. You need different skills, not more skills.

There is a huge variability in large organizations, which means that every idea has been tried by someone at some time. To make a case for a policy, a person does not need to prove a proposition, but rather needs to go out and get an example of the idea in action.

## **Management and working with others**

There are no generic management techniques. Skills help, but context matters just as much. Even the best skills need to be applied in the right way in idiosyncratic settings.

You have to be yourself at all times. You have to talk the way you are. And do not back down when people react against who you are.

It's all there at entry. You develop the enduring patterns of the relationship at the very beginning.

Both sides communicate with each other, send signals, in their early encounters. You have to communicate high standards of excellence at the beginning or you will not have the opportunity to do so again.

Always show people great courtesy. Courtesy does not cost a penny.

Especially show courtesy and respect to people on the way out. Even if you fire someone, you need to celebrate the good work they did while they were in the organization. It sends a signal to the rest of the workers – and to outsiders as well.

The best and most productive people are known to everyone in the organization, as are the most troublesome and unproductive people.

To make an organization work, offer rewards and recognition to the people who do the best work. Get rid of people who do not contribute. Firing people is an unpleasant but inescapable reality of management.

Fear is the most deadly attribute of public service – fear of failure, fear being discovered, fear of being humiliated. Deal with fear in an organization by showing courtesy and appropriately sharing the process of decision-making and implementation . . . and sharing credit for success.

It is not enough to be better – morally or intellectually – than other people in the organization. A real ability to listen trumps self-righteousness every time.

Reach outside as well as inside the organization.

Information is power. Even poorly funded and organized groups can make a difference if they have the facts at their command.

## **Policy**

Most of the work of all other human services – welfare, police, public health – in some way make up for the failures of public education. So let's fix education.

If you don't have a deep and powerful respect for the "core business" (for example, teaching in schools), you will fail. Managers are often contemptuous of the core work that people do in organizations, and that insures an overall breakdown of the organization.

## **Success**

Show advancement not by demonstrating that you have the right answers, but that you can learn together as a group.

You know you are a good manager when the work that you have done gets sustained and adapted by later managers. The key question for a manager is: "What did I leave behind?"